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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000507

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KWBG IS

SUBJECT: PEACE NOW'S SOON-TO-BE PUBLISHED 2006 SETTLEMENTS  
REPORT

REF: TEL AVIV 00374

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On February 14, Peace Now's settlement watch co-coordinator Hagit Ofran told econoff that the organization plans to release its annual report on settlement and outpost growth on Monday, February 19. Ofran provided econoff with an advanced briefing on the organization's observations on outpost growth, indicating that despite the GOI's commitments to the US to curb settlement growth and evacuate post-March 2001 outposts, outposts still continue to grow and are taking on characteristics of more permanent neighborhoods. According to Ofran, in 2006, Peace Now saw 251 cases of expansion in outposts, including the addition of new caravans, construction of permanent structures, opening of new roads or fencing, and infrastructure work. Last year, despite the evacuation of one outpost -- Yitav East -- consisting of three empty trailers, Ofran said that five other outposts that currently have evacuation orders issued against them have continued to grow. On E-1, Ofran commented to econoff that the terracing at the site looks to be for erosion control for the road below. However, she cautioned that infrastructure work is often the first step to establishing a settlement, and predicted that it would be only a matter of time until a government sympathetic to settlement growth would take advantage of the Israeli presence and infrastructure at the site to forward larger E-1 settlement plans. End summary.

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Outposts Becoming Permanent Neighborhoods

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¶2. (C) Despite its commitments to the US to evacuate outposts established after March 2001, the GOI has continued to allow existing outposts to grow. According to Ofran, in 2006, Peace Now saw 251 cases of outpost expansion. These actions -- consisting of the addition of new caravans, building of permanent structures, road paving or fencing, and infrastructure work -- have enabled these outposts to develop characteristics similar to permanent communities. From a total of 101 outposts monitored by Peace Now, 30 have permanent structures and seven have built new roads within or around their perimeters. Of the 51 post-March 2001 outposts included under the GOI's roadmap commitments, 27 of them expanded in 2006.

¶3. (C) Ofran asserted that the GOI does not intend to enforce the law and evacuate outposts. Although one outpost (Yitav East) consisting of three empty trailers was evacuated, five others (Mitzpe Lachish, Givat Assaf, Ramat Gilad, Ma'ale Rehav'am, and Mitzpe Yitzhar) that currently have evacuation orders issued against them have not been

evacuated and still continue to expand. Ofran noted that the evacuation of Yitav East proves that outpost evacuations can occur without unusual effort. Yitav East was an unmanned outpost established in mid-2005. It was evacuated quietly, and the evacuation was not even noticed by most settlement watchers.

¶ 14. (C) Ofran could not, however, definitively answer econoff's question on whether the caravans evacuated from Yitav East were taken out of the West Bank or merely moved to another settlement nearby, as the GOI has often done in other cases. She said that in 2006, Peace Now observed a net of 90 new caravans added to West Bank outposts -- 127 new caravans added to the outposts, but 37 also were removed within this timeframe (Note: If the caravans removed from the outposts were placed in other existing settlements, such action could be considered as settlement expansion. End note.) Peace Now estimates that approximately 2,000 settlers live in West Bank outposts.

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It's Not Natural Growth  
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¶ 15. (C) When asked her opinion on natural growth, Ofran answered that compared to the overall Israeli population growth rate of 1.8 percent, and Jerusalem's (Israel's largest district) growth rate of 2.3 percent, the settler growth rate in the West Bank -- being 5.2 percent -- is double either of those two figures. Ofran noted that settler population growth in the West Bank is not due to natural growth alone, but that a large section of it is due to migration. Ofran also maintained that new construction ongoing in settlements is, for the most part, not in the form of enlarging existing

TEL AVIV 00000507 002 OF 002

housing units to accommodate natural family growth. She said that a large percentage of it is actually additional building to absorb more settlers.

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E-1  
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¶ 16. (C) At the request of econoff, Ofran also went to the E-1 construction site to assess ongoing construction. As other embassy contacts have said (ref), Ofran remarked that the terracing, located approximately 400 meters south west of the police station, seemed to be for erosion control for the road below. However, she described the ongoing construction as a "taboo" broken by the GOI. Ofran emphasized that construction at E-1 had never been allowed before due to the sensitivity of the area. She opined that it would only be a matter of time before a government sympathetic to the settler movement would use the new Israeli presence (the police headquarters) and the infrastructure being built at the site to move forward on E-1 settlement plans. (Note: Danny Seidemann, founder of the Israeli human rights NGO Ir Amim, agrees that the terracing is likely not for settlement construction. End note.)

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Comment  
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¶ 17. (C) The Peace Now report will likely be published while the Secretary is still on the ground in Israel. The report generally garners a great deal of attention and extensive analysis and commentary.

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JONES